

Perseverance

By Stephen L France (c) 2012

One body lies on the floor beside mine, decorated in coagulated crimson.
It is lifeless.
I, am not.
My chest begins to heave, slow, then fast.
I cough and roll my body to the side as a drizzle of red splashes from my mouth.
Sucking in as much air as my chest permits, the inflation of my lungs mumbles defiance against death.
Raising my torso, bones in my spine click in descending succession as my mind commands every fibre to consciousness.
Eyesight is a disturbing blur.
My knee caps squirt blood as if the cartilage has melted and desires escape from my legs.
He nearly finished it, I think. So unbelievably close.
The tunnel is dark. So absurdly obscure. And the coldness; it coaxes me to return to sleep and never wake up.
Refusal of death is potent in the rapid return of my firm heart beat.
The waves in my vision release their distortion. My eyesight is clear. My black suit begins to mend, piecing itself back together, and my blue shirt emulates. All the blood stains on my clothes evaporate. Every single dirt mark disintegrates.
I examine the shirt, shining like new.
People used to admire that shirt...but it doesn't matter. Nothing, matters. Just got to survive.
My eyes dart around my surroundings.
How did it get so dark? I ask myself. I can barely see.
I'm fortunate though. My vision's always been good.
I must go on, I tell myself. So many to fight, so much to undo...but this is for all of them. They're counting on me. Relying on me. Depending on me. I can't fail.
I get up, struggling on both legs like a paralytic, paving his path to the restoration of his limbs.
The pitch black tunnel is so thin, I can almost feel the walls breathing their musty stench on me.
Encompassed by the dark, the glimmer of light is far in the distance; a small, white ball producing a strobe, like a heartbeat. That light has been my guide from inception, and it has resurrected me more times than I deserve. As long as that light remains alive, so do I.
My right leg collapses and I'm on all fours again, feeling the cold, cobble floor

digging into my knees.

I breathe hard.

My body is healing. Fast. A fortunate result of hard physical training.

Bones relocate back to their correct position. Bruises fade. Cuts sew up. Gashes regenerate flesh, filling the crevasses, materialising new skin.

Finally, my body has revived.

I glare ahead and make myself a thousand promises about my next opponents.

Be cold. Be ruthless. Be uncompromising. They are. You must be.

I hear multiple sets of footsteps approaching. Ten, maybe twenty more.

The first one comes. He's clumsy. Moves slow and fights even slower. He reveals all his insecurities. He's amateur.

One punch flies so far from my face, he might as well have been aiming for the air. The other misses my torso by a great breadth.

Several spin kicks are easily evaded and then, the opening announces itself. An easy kill. One punch, straight through. Not aiming for the person, but aiming behind him. My fist breaks his chest bone, punctures his lungs, and splits right through his spine. His body is impaled on my forearm, head drooping on his neck like a hat on a coat hanger.

I pity him. Under other circumstances, it may not have had to occur, but...he was one of them.

No. Compromise.

The other footsteps have vanished. I could have sworn there were twenty approaching. Perhaps not.

As I relieve my arm from the body, I begin to walk, then stumble in my step. It hits, like a hypodermic needle applied by a doctor still in training. I hold myself up against the wall and stare at the black atmosphere in front of me.

Maybe, I'm in the wrong. Maybe, they're right. Perhaps, I'm the villain. They all detest me so much.

Another figure darts from the shadows so quickly, my mouth drops.

Where did he come from?

He's fast and cunning, but he has obvious weaknesses.

His combat skills are lacking. He's inexperienced, making blatant mistakes.

Punches go wide, kicks touch air. His end, is coming.

I throw one firm kick to his side.

His ribs go.

He knows it's over.

He scarpers into the darkness before I have a chance to finish him. It doesn't matter. He'll be back.

I begin to pace the walkway. Fast. Then faster.

Before I can comprehend, I'm powering through like I've never known.

I'm stronger, better, quicker, intellectually superior, wiser. I've become a king among men. Solitude and isolation are my greatest allies.

Then, I enter a room.

I look behind and all I see is wall.

I'm trapped.

Me, four walls, a dim flickering lantern hanging from the ceiling, and a man sitting in a chair in the centre.

I know him.

He knows me.

He knows me and he hates me. He's so repulsed by my presence that his odium is intimidating alone.

His eyes recede.

If only I knew what I had done to offend him that he would persecute me for all this time - I'd fix it. Immediately. But every time we've faced each other, he says nothing. Shows no expression. Gives me no indication of rationale, supporting his abhorrence.

If only I could understand. If only I could make it right.

But it's all part of the punishment. The oblivion. The uncertainty. The lack of knowledge. It makes the penalty that more savage.

He flips his chair to the wall.

It breaks into a hundred pieces.

He is standing now. Six foot eight and wide as a bull, muscles upon muscles, bulging through a white suit, shirt, and tie that match the colour of his long beard.

I always forget how powerful he is.

Why do I forget?

He takes his first step toward me. I'm apprehensive, dwarfed by his colossal height.

I tell myself: *I'm good at what I do. I've fought this long. Survived for longer.*

The air becomes frost, the darkness increases—he's looming closer.

I put my fists up, but I'm conscious of the futility.

He raises one arm. I cross my forearms. The fist collides with my block, throwing me against the wall, head smashing against brick, dazed, stars, colours, sparkles.

I feel the first punch; all four knuckles embedded in my cheek. It happens again. Then again. Then again. And then again.

My face is mangled, but it's not over.

I lie on the floor and endure the weight of him crushing me. The wind of his arm pulling back, breezes my nose. That's the last time I feel anything on my face. Powerful blows, punch after punch sever nerve endings.

Somehow, still astute, I count two-thousand, five-hundred and fifty punches. Five hundred for the face. Fifty to the right arm, fifty to the left. Seventy to my chest. Sixty to my stomach. Eighty stamps on my right leg. Eighty stamps on my left leg. Then a bodily pummelling like a butcher beating meat.

He grabs me by the shirt. One handed. Drags me off the ground so fast I might as well have been catapulted up. He waves a hand in the air and a floating mirror appears in front of us.

I don't recognise myself.

I would like to think it's over, but I know the truth. He hasn't even begun.

The mirror vanishes.
In moments, my wrists and ankles are clasped to the wall with iron bracelets.
I attempt to block all my thoughts from my head.
It's too late.
He's read my mind. He knows my fears, and my relentless torments.
His icy gaze moves from my teeth, to my eyes, to my finger nails, to my groin.
He pulls a weapon from his pocket; a serrated dagger, the blade gleaming with anticipation of what it will do.
I know this weapon too well.
He looks at my chest and places the point of the blade in the centre. He gently taps the steel against my sternum, creating a dim echo.
It's coming. I'm going to feel this.
He pushes the blade in.
I feel it.
My heart is pierced. He knows the right points.
It goes in, sufficient to keep me between the brink of life and death.
He looks at my fingers. In seconds, the digits on my hands are lined with bamboo shoots under the nails.
One by one, he gently taps them in. Tears stream from my face.
I don't make a sound.
His gaze drifts to my groin. He doesn't blink. He pulls out a very thin, very long, very shiny nail. He moves his hand through the air and a hammer fades into his palm.
He looks down at my groin again.
I know what's coming.
There's no menacing smile. No raise of the eyebrow. No twitch in the cheek. Just a desire to make sure I suffer as much anguish as is physically possible, without hope of release.
The nail is pushed up against my trouser leg. *Right. There.*
I blink a few times and grit my teeth.
This is really, really, really, going to hurt.
It's sharp. So hot and unyielding, it almost feels like an ice cube. Nerves are on fire and they're flames that refuse to be extinguished.
I bear it.
He looks at my teeth and eyes. He pulls a pair of pliers from thin air.
This has happened before, I reiterate. It won't be as painful. It won't be as painful. It won't be as painful.
But the truth is, it will be. Maybe even more so.
Every time we fight, he's stronger, *but so am I.*
BUT SO.AM.I.
The surge is there; like nothing I've ever felt before. I don't know where it comes from and I don't care to ask. Just use it.
I break free of the shackles, a bloody mess. I smack the pliers from his hand and push

him back.

He is shocked.

It's a quick succession of blows, so quick and so easily executed. Right, left, right, right, left, right, then a knee to the ribcage, and an upward elbow.

He plummets to the floor and I see the opening. Something to silence him; a point to put him in perpetual pain. I drop to the floor with my elbow aimed at his throat. It connects. My arm rebounds and his body jackknifes. He chokes and gargles, then his body gives.

In seconds, his corpse disintegrates, as do the weapons lodged in my body.

I roll to the side and huddle on the floor, blood gushing out of every orifice in my skull.

Face down, breathing my last breaths in a puddle of my own fluids, I know the truth. This is not the end. He will return and he will punish me again. This fight will resurrect constantly; an endless struggle with a reward that may never emerge.

Maybe I should just...

The room becomes a corridor again and the dark path is open to me. The light in the distance reappears, but it's tiny. It begins to twinkle and fade. I close my eyes. This is it. The end. Finally. Finally, I can rest...

...

No!

No.

Get up.

Get.

Up.

Breathe.

They need you.

Get. Up.

I rise, put one leg before the other and hoist my body up. I put my hand over my mouth, cough, and blood spills out between my fingers.

I'm healing again. All organs are fixing themselves. Fast.

Maybe one day I will be free of all this...if I'm lucky. Keep training. Keep fighting. Maintain optimism. Be the idealist. Be the good man. Honour. Integrity. Decency. Keep hoping and just maybe...

The dark corridor beckons.

Like an estranged fairy godmother, scouting in the distance, the glimmer of light is still far away, but it's sparkling now, brighter than ever.

I must keep going.

I must *persevere*.

THE END?